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TO: Suburban Subcommittee

FROM: Robert M. Litke, Director

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SUBJECT: Suburban Issue Paper

The following commentary is intended to help focus and facilitate discussion within the committee.

Major revisions to Chapter 42 (subdivision ordinance) were adopted by city council in March of 1999. The basic standards that had governed subdivision rules and regulations and therefore the standards of development had been suburban in nature: low density, large lots, deep front setbacks, looping streets, culs-de-sac and sprawl.

A set of planning standards was created to differentiate between suburban and urban areas. The suburban area was defined as everything outside Loop 610 and everything inside 610 was considered urban. While substantive changes were made to planning standards for the urban area, the basic elements governing suburban development remained pretty much the same. For example, high density was facilitated in the urban area through a variety of adjusted standards dealing with setbacks, open space requirements, reduced minimum lots sizes and lot coverage limitations, but such provisions were not included under suburban rules. Provisions were included to enable areas to be declared "urban" if they met certain characteristics (see 42-101), but to date no suburban areas have been re-designated.

The fact is that areas are changing to meet the demands of the market. Demography is driving change in life styles in urban and suburban areas. The demand for urban living (or urban lifestyles) is ratcheting up land prices making it harder for developers to make the economics work. Developers in suburban areas may be willing to take the entrepreneurial risk and experiment with urban type developments, but present rules do not facilitate much in the way of innovation. A complex process to obtain a variance must be followed and the approval process is not predictable. Developers who treasure predictability all too often will follow the path of meeting all the rules even when the end result may not be the best.

But there have been occasions where new ideas have been introduced into the suburban area with success. The Woodlands, which comes within the Houston area of Extra Territorial Jurisdiction where our suburban platting rules apply, sought and obtained a variance from the Planning Commission that enabled an urban style development to move forward successfully in the town center area.

There are other examples of "outside the box" thinking, but they still are few and far between. If a developer believes there is a market demand for a new type of product, shouldn't that entrepreneurial attitude be encouraged? Everything in the suburbs is not new, nor is all development taking place in master planned communities. Suburban areas do get old and can be redeveloped. Our rules do not necessarily facilitate that.

What elements of our urban rules would make good sense in the suburbs? How do we support the character and lifestyle of suburban neighborhoods and still encourage and support change? Are we guaranteeing continued sprawl and more time on the road for commuting, shopping and other day to day activities? Are we responding to the market or simply not offering choices?

Some of our urban planning standards might be appropriate for inclusion in suburban standards under appropriate conditions. The challenge before the committee is to come up with the right mix.

attachment: 1996 Chapter 42 Memorandum